



WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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THE AUTUMN AFTER NEXT

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Being a wizard missionary to the Free'l

needed more than magic—

it called for a miracle!

THE spell the Free'l were casting ought to have drawn the moon down from the heavens, made water run uphill, and inverted the order of the seasons. But, since they had got broor's blood instead of newt's, were using alganon instead of vervet juice, and were three days later than the solstice anyhow, nothing happened.

Neeshan watched their antics with a bitter smile.

He'd tried hard with them.

The Free'l were really a challenge to evangelical wizardry. They had some natural talent for magic, as was evinced by the frequent attempts they made to perform it, and they were interested in what he told them about its capacities. But they simply wouldn't take the trouble to do it right.

How long had they been stamping around in their circle, anyhow? Since early moonset, and it was now almost dawn. No doubt they

would go on stamping all next day, if not interrupted. It was time to call a halt.

Neeshan strode into the middle of the circle. Rhn, the village chief, looked up from his drumming.

"Go away," he said. "You'll spoil the charm."

"What charm? Can't you see by now, Rhn, that it isn't going to work?"

"Of course it will. It just takes time."

"Hell it will. Hell it does. Watch."

Neeshan pushed Rhn to one side and squatted down in the center of the circle. From the pockets of his black robe he produced stylus, dragon's blood, oil of anointing, and salt.

He drew a design on the ground with the stylus, dropped dragon's blood at the corners of the parallelogram, and touched the inner cusps with the oil. Then, sighting carefully at the double red and white sun, which was just coming up, he touched the *outer* cusps with salt. An intense smoke sprang up.

WHEN the smoke died away, a small lizardlike creature was visible in the parallelogram.

"Tell the demon what you want," Neeshan ordered the Free'l.

The Free'l hesitated. They had few wants, after all, which was one of the things

that made teaching them magic difficult.

"Two big dyla melons," one of the younger ones said at last.

"A new andana necklace," said another.

"A tooter like the one you have," said Rhn, who was ambitious.

"Straw for a new roof on my hut," said one of the older females.

"That's enough for now," Neeshan interrupted. "The demon can't bring you a tooter, Rhn—you have to ask another sort of demon for that. The other things he can get. Sammel, to work!"

The lizard in the parallelogram twitched its tail. It disappeared, and returned almost immediately with melons, a handsome necklace, and an enormous heap of straw.

"Can I go now?" it asked.

"Yes." Neeshan turned to the Free'l, who were sharing the dyla melons out around their circle. "You see? *That's* how it ought to be. You cast a spell. You're careful with it. And it works. Right away."

"When you do it, it works," Rhn answered.

"Magic works when *anybody* does it. But you have to do it right."

Rhn raised his mud-plastered shoulders in a shrug. "It's such a lot of dreeze, doing it that way. Magic ought to be fun." He walked away, munching on a slice of the

melon the demon had brought.

Neeshan stared after him, his eyes hot. "Dreeze" was a Free'l word that referred originally to the nasal drip that accompanied that race's virulent head colds. It had been extended to mean almost anything annoying. The Free'l, who spent much of their time sitting in the rain, had a lot of colds in the head.

Wasn't there anything to be done with these people? Even the simplest spell was too dreezish for them to bother with.

He was getting a headache. He'd better perform a headache-removing spell.

He retired to the hut the Free'l had assigned to him. The spell worked, of course, but it left him feeling soggy and dispirited. He was still standing in the hut, wondering what he should do next, when his big black-and-gold tooter in the corner gave a faint "woof." That meant headquarters wanted to communicate with him.

Neeshan carefully aligned the tooter, which is basically a sort of lens for focusing neural force, with the rising double suns. He moved his couch out into a parallel position and lay down on it. In a minute or two he was deep in a cataleptic trance.

The message from headquarters was long, circuitous, and couched in the elaborate, ego-caressing ceremonial of

high magic, but its gist was clear enough.

"Your report received," it boiled down to. "We are glad to hear that you are keeping on with the Free'l. We do not expect you to succeed with them—none of the other magical missionaries we have sent out ever has. But if you *should* succeed, by any chance, you would get your senior warlock's rating immediately. It would be no exaggeration, in fact, to say that the highest offices in the Brotherhood would be open to you."

NEESHAN came out of his trance. His eyes were round with wonder and cupidity. His senior warlock's rating—why, he wasn't due to get that for nearly four more six hundred-and-five-day years. And the highest offices in the Brotherhood—that could mean anything. Anything! He hadn't realized the Brotherhood set such store on converting the Free'l. Well, now, a reward like that was worth going to some trouble for.

Neeshan sat down on his couch, his elbows on his knees, his fists pressed against his forehead, and tried to think.

The Free'l liked magic, but they were lazy. Anything that involved accuracy impressed them as dreezish. And they didn't want anything. That was the biggest difficulty. Magic had nothing to offer

them. He had never, Neeshan thought, heard one of the Free'l express a want.

Wait, though. There was Rhn.

He had shown a definite interest in Neeshan's tooter. Something in its intricate, florid black-and-gold curves seemed to fascinate him. True, he hadn't been interested in it for its legitimate uses, which were to extend and develop a magician's spiritual power. He probably thought that having it would give him more prestige and influence among his people. But for one of the Free'l to say "I wish I had that" about anything whatever meant that he could be worked on. Could the tooter be used as a bribe?

Neeshan sighed heavily. Getting a tooter was painful and laborious. A tooter was carefully fitted to an individual magician's personality; in a sense, it was a part of his personality, and if Neeshan let Rhn have his tooter, he would be letting him have a part of himself. But the stakes were enormous.

Neeshan got up from his couch. It had begun to rain, but he didn't want to spend time performing a rain-repelling spell. He wanted to find Rhn.

Rhn was standing at the edge of the swamp, luxuriating in the downpour. The mud had washed from his shoulders, and he was already

sniffing. Neeshan came to the point directly.

"I'll give you my tooter," he said, almost choking over the words, "if you'll do a spell—a simple spell, mind you—exactly right."

Rhn hesitated. Neeshan felt an impulse to kick him. Then he said, "Well . . ."

Neeshan began his instructions. It wouldn't do for him to help Rhn too directly, but he was willing to do everything reasonable. Rhn listened, scratching himself in the armpits and sneezing from time to time.

After Neeshan had been through the directions twice, Rhn stopped him. "No, don't bother telling me again—it's just more dreeze. Give me the materials and I'll show you. Don't forget, you're giving me the tooter for this."

HE STARTED off, Neeshan after him, to the latter's hut. While Neeshan looked on tensely, Rhn began going through the actions Neeshan had told him. Half-way through the first decad, he forgot. He inverted the order of the hand-passes, sprinkled salt on the wrong point, and mispronounced the names in the invocation. When he pulled his hands apart at the end, only a tiny yellow flame sprang up.

Neeshan cursed bitterly. Rhn, however, was delighted. "Look at that, will you!" he

exclaimed, clapping his chapped, scabby little hands together. "It worked! I'll take the tooter home with me now."

"The tooter? For *that*? You didn't do the spell right."

Rhn stared at him indignantly. "You mean, you're not going to give me the tooter after all the trouble I went to? I only did it as a favor, really. Neeshan, I think it's very mean of you."

"Try the spell again."

"Oh, dreeze. You're too impatient. You never give anything time to work."

He got up and walked off.

For the next few days, everybody in the village avoided Neeshan. They all felt sorry for Rhn, who'd worked so hard, done everything he was told to, and been cheated out of his tooter by Neeshan. In the end the magician, cursing his own weakness, surrendered the tooter to Rhn. The accusatory atmosphere in the normally indifferent Free'l was intolerable.

But now what was he to do? He'd given up his tooter—he had to ask Rhn to lend it to him when he wanted to contact headquarters—and the senior rating was no nearer than before. His head ached constantly, and all the spells he performed to cure the pain left him feeling wretchedly tired out.

Magic, however, is an art of many resources, not all of

them savory. Neeshan, in his desperation, began to invoke demons more disreputable than those he would ordinarily have consulted. In effect, he turned for help to the magical underworld.

His thuggish informants were none too consistent. One demon told him one thing, another something else. The consensus, though, was that while there was nothing the Free'l actually wanted enough to go to any trouble for it (they didn't even want to get rid of their nasal drip, for example—in a perverse way they were proud of it), there *was* one thing they disliked intensely—Neeshan himself.

The Free'l thought, the demons reported, that he was inconsiderate, tactless, officious, and a crashing bore. They regarded him as the psychological equivalent of the worst case of dreeze ever known, carried to the nth power. They wished he'd drop dead or hang himself.

Neeshan dismissed the last of the demons. His eyes had begun to shine. The Free'l thought he was a nuisance, did they? They thought he was the most annoying thing they'd encountered in the course of their racial history? Good. Fine. Splendid. Then he'd *really* annoy them.

He'd have to watch out for poison, of course. But in the end, they'd turn to magic to get rid of him. They'd have to.

And then he'd have them.
They'd be caught.

One act of communal magic that really worked and they'd be sold on magic. He'd be sure of his senior rating.

NEESHAN began his campaign immediately. Where the Free'l were, there was he. He was always on hand with unwanted explanations, hypercritical objections, and maddening "wouldn't-it-be-betters."

Whereas earlier in his evangelical mission he had confined himself to pointing out how much easier magic would make life for the Free'l, he now counceled and advised them on every phase of their daily routine, from mud-smearing to rain-sitting, and from the time they got up until they went to bed. He even pursued them with advice *after* they got into bed, and told them how to run their sex lives—advice which the Free'l, who set quite as much store by their sex lives as anybody does, resented passionately.

But most of all he harped on their folly in putting up with nasal drip, and instructed them over and over again in the details of a charm—a quite simple charm—for getting rid of it. The charm would, he informed them, work equally well against anything—or *person*—that they found annoying.

The food the Free'l brought him began to have a highly peculiar taste. Neeshan grinned and hung a theriacal charm, a first-class antidote to poison, around his neck. The Free'l's distaste for him bothered him, naturally, but he could stand it. When he had repeated the anti-annoyance charm to a group of Free'l last night, he had noticed that Rhn was listening eagerly. It wouldn't be much longer now.

On the morning of the day before the equinox, Neeshan was awakened from sleep by an odd prickling sensation in his ears. It was a sensation he'd experienced only once before in his life, during his novitiate, and it took him a moment to identify it. Then he realized what it was. Somebody was casting a spell against him.

At last! At last! It had worked!

Neeshan put on his robe and hurried to the door of the hut. The day seemed remarkably overcast, almost like night, but that was caused by the spell. This one happened to involve the optic nerves.

He began to grope his way cautiously toward the village center. He didn't want the Free'l to see him and get suspicious, but he did want to have the pleasure of seeing them cast their first accurate spell. (He was well protected against wind-damage from it,

of course.) When he was almost at the center, he took cover behind a hut. He peered out.

They were doing it *right*. Oh, what a satisfaction! Neeshan felt his chest expand with pride. And when the spell worked, when the big wind swooped down and blew him away, the Free'l would certainly receive a second magical missionary more kindly. Neeshan might even come back, well disguised, himself.

The ritual went on. The dancers made three circles to the left, three circles to the right. Cross over, and all sprinkle salt on the interstices of the star Rhn had traced on the ground with the point of a knife. Back to the circle. One to the left, one to right, while Rhn, in the center of the circle, dusted over the salt with—with *what*?

"Hey!" Neeshan yelled in sudden alarm. "Not brimstone! Watch out! You're not doing it ri—"

His chest contracted suddenly, as if a large, stony hand had seized his thorax above the waist. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he

couldn't even say "Ouch!" It felt as if his chest—no, his whole body—was being compressed in on itself and turning into something as hard as stone.

He tried to wave his tiny, heavy arms in a countercharm; he couldn't even inhale. The last emotion he experienced was one of bitterness. He might have *known* the Free'l couldn't get anything right.

THE Free'l take a dim view of the small stone image that now stands in the center of their village. It is much too heavy for them to move, and while it is not nearly so much of a nuisance as Neeshan was when he was alive, it inconveniences them. They have to make a detour around it when they do their magic dances.

They still hope, though, that the spells they are casting to get rid of him will work eventually. If he doesn't go away this autumn, he will the autumn after next. They have a good deal of faith in magic, when you come right down to it. And patience is their long suit.

E N D

